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Keywords

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Human Movement and the Concept of Place: The Influence on Ethnographic Research In Anthropology

Ashley Haycock

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of human movement through the origins of diaspora. This paper also examines migration and the reconceptualization of this type of movement by anthropologists in relation to the modern phenomenon of globalization. Diaspora, migration, and their link to globalization will be examined, as will their role in the constantly changing practice of ethnographic fieldwork, specifically multi-sited ethnography.

Fennell (2007:1) describes diasporas as being the "dispersions of people to new locations due to abduction or to hostile circumstances in the lands from which they fled". This type of human movement is believed to distance families from the cultures to which they had originally belonged to – culture being the "learned beliefs, knowledge, practices, and behaviour with which people live as a group" (Fennell 2007:1-2). However, culture is a very problematic concept to define, one that has taken a lot of effort by many academics. For the purpose of this paper, the above definition will be used.

As a result of globalization, there is an increase in accessibility when conducting international research in the academic world. Researchers are able to conduct their research in many more places than they would have been able to previously, and therefore connections between varying places and groups of peoples are able to be made. As importantly, the global academic movement has increased the prominence of non-Western scholars in various academic discourses. This has a direct impact on the study of human movement, as it is an aspect of globalization and therefore links the entire world. Specifically, human movement is having an increasingly large impact on anthropological research, especially in terms of ethnography. Given our future of globalization and 'multi-layered evolution,' we cannot understand our own involvement or changing world without critical thinking skills (Tsing 2000:328). It is this critical way of thinking that is essential in order to view globalization holistically. Contributing to this idea is Appadurai (1988:16) who states that, "the problems

of place and voice are vital to anthropological practice and so is the relationship between them”.

The boundaries and landscapes, in which populations are observed in, have an impact on how their culture is viewed by the ethnographer. It is with this notion that Marcus (1995:96) concludes that we must “move out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space.” This mode of ethnographic research, entitled multi-sited ethnography, is defined by the fact that in order to gain a true global perspective, it is impossible to remain focused on a single site of observation. It is within this mode of ethnographic research that we are able to examine cultural formation as an aspect of the entire world, and not merely a specific characteristic of single site observation (Marcus 1995:96). Using Tsing’s (2000) views on globalization, and the perception of place and its impact on the concept of culture as discussed by Appadurai (1988), it will be argued that human movement and the concept of place has had a significant impact on anthropology as a discipline, specifically in the emergence of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995). This has helped anthropologists to view cultural formation as an aspect of the entire world due to the increasing prevalence of human movement in today’s society.

Diaspora

Stemming from the Greek *dia-speirein*, the word diaspora means ‘to scatter’ or ‘to sow’. First used in the Old Testament to indicate the dispersal of the disciples and the spreading of the Gospel, it later referred to the resettlement of the Jewish people outside of Israel (Cheyette 2003:46). The largest case of diaspora was the abduction and transatlantic transport of enslaved Africans to the New World in the fifteenth century. The African Slave Trade is viewed as an early form of globalization, extensively disrupting its victims socially, culturally, and economically (Fennell 2007:2). In his paper, Axel (2004:28) concludes that it is difficult for us to find the centre of diaspora since it initially defies our attempts to contextualize, frame, or circumscribe. Since diasporic locality is not strictly centralized, it appears that diaspora must be referred to as being here and there, or at least, elsewhere. Diaspora can also be defined by its loss

of context. This view of diaspora allows us to analyze it with a regard to a place of origin – or homeland. Analytical methods, such as genealogy, allows anthropologists to distinguish one diaspora from another. Genealogy gives anthropologists an insight into the past lives of people by revealing their ancestors and therefore, their heritage. By tracing a group of people that have experienced diaspora through their genealogy, we are able to define the locality, or homeland, where we can determine features such as language and ethnicity. Through these characteristics, anthropologists are able to identify the aspects of the culture that endured being subjected to the acculturation pressures of the host country and the distance from the populations’ homeland. These features of genealogy (language, ethnicity, etc.) are seen to endure in diasporic cultural life today no matter how transformed in the ‘host country’ or how distant from the homeland. Axel states that the place of origin of a people allows us “to understand diaspora as something objectively present in the world today with regard to something else in the past” (2004:28). In turn, this understanding enables the rejoining of diaspora and homeland – something that has been supposedly separated by history (Axel 2004:28).

Mobility and Identity

There is no denying that mobility and deterritorialization, as a result of diaspora, have an impact on one’s identity. Given that people are now more mobile and their identities less fixed, Gupta and Ferguson argue that this “rapidly expanding and quickening mobility of people combines with the refusal of cultural products and practices to ‘stay put’ to give a profound sense of a loss of territorial roots, of an erosion or the cultural distinctiveness of places, and of ferment in anthropological theory” (2007:339). In present day, where identities are increasingly deterritorialized, the merit in speaking of a ‘native land’ is highly debatable. Cultural certainties and fixities of a population (language, religion, etc.) are upset and it appears as if it is not only the displaced, but also the people who remain in their familiar, ancestral lands who find the nature of their relation to these places changing. While deterritorialization has a physical component in terms of migration, there is an ideological component to deterritorialization as well, in the sense that concepts and ideas are able to transcend

boundaries in today's world. From the increase in globalized ideas due to human movement and the global media, many ideological aspects of culture (belief, religion, values, etc.) have the ability to change. In order to progress, anthropologists must accept the notion that communities are not just literal entities but also people that live, to varying degrees, in a globally interconnected world (Gupta and Ferguson 2007:340-41).

Along with the notion of progress comes power. Appadurai (1988:20) concludes the problem of place is ultimately a problem of power. The power distribution involved in the relationship between places is to blame for the misrepresentation of place among ethnographers. Ultimately, this is linked to the institutional diversification of anthropology and the fact that anthropology is a discipline constructed in the West, and, until operations outside of this context become more accepted, it is impossible to accomplish neutral discussions in the politics of spatial migration (Appadurai 1988:20). Neutrality is a crucial component to the discipline of anthropology, and is arguably mandatory to construct an accurate perception of a people. Hence, the emphasis on viewing the world as a connected system is important in being able to form a neutral and unbiased opinion regarding the politics of spatial migration.

According to Tsing (2000:330), having this type of global framework when interpreting the concept of diaspora and its impact on anthropology today allows us "to consider the making and remaking of geographical and historical agents and the forms of their agency in relation to movement, interaction, and shifting, competing claims about community, culture and scale". It is important to emphasize that places are made through their connections with each other, not their isolation from one another. Through globalization, we are able to imagine the interconnection and sudden transformation of our world. This interconnection is believed to be created through circulation, which encompasses a range of things including the exchange of people, money, cultures, information, and the process of globalization itself (Tsing 2000).

Ethnographic Research

Anthropology began studying the concept of migration, as a social, political, economic, and cultural process, relatively late compared to other disciplines. According to Brettell (2003:ix), among other reasons for the delay of migration studies in anthropology, "it did not fit the timeless and bounded idea of culture that framed their analysis". For example, when Margaret Mead was studying in Papua New Guinea in 1933, she ignored the fact that fifty two percent of Chambri (Tchambuli) men, between the ages of fifteen and forty-five, were working abroad as migrant labourers because she "did not take these articulations with the larger system into consideration" (Brettell 2003:ix). It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that anthropologists began to recognize migration deserved attention as a topic for discussion. Initially, the emphasis was laid on the rural-urban migration in developing countries such as Mexico, Kenya, and Brazil. Along with peasant studies and urban anthropology, the interest in migrants and migration has grown substantially for the last thirty years (Brettell 2003:ix-x).

Through globalization, stereotypes of anthropology's past are renewed in order to confront them. Static cultures that failed to move out of place were an accepted notion in the 'old' anthropology. According to Tsing (2000:339), this idea of thinking "imprisons its objects in a cell; interconnection and movement in the form of 'global flows' are thus experienced as a form of liberation". While accepting a dynamic and global view of culture is an exciting, new thought, it may limit attention to the quirky, eccentricities of individual culture history, fundamental to American anthropology. However, it would seem that globalization and the increase of human movement have forced anthropologists to re-examine the ways in which they conduct their ethnographic research. This became evident in the 1980s when American anthropologists recommitted themselves to a more open and reflexive approach to the inequalities and interconnections among the people and places they studied (Tsing 2000:339-40).

Since then, anthropologists have dedicated their work to specific modes of cultural interconnection that tie different types of people in

distant places. This allows for the possibility of regionalism (regional work) and emphasizes the appreciation of histories within the realm of interconnection; instead of being trapped within geographical boundaries. One criticism to this 'new' type of anthropology, which highlights globalization, is that there is the possibility of homogenizing the varying types of people and cultures therefore blurring the differences among places. It is important for scholars and readers to assume that all globalisms (attitudes/policies that put the entire world's interests above particular nations) have the same base and that they read the work of globalist anthropologists as a group possessing the same viewpoint (Tsing 2000:342).

Another aspect of ethnographic research is the consideration of space. Spatial dimensions of ethnographic research including defining maps and terrains, regions and areas, landscapes and environments, distance and scale, centers and boundaries. According to Appadurai (1988:16), the criticism of the conceptualization of space by the ethnographer is "the problem of the culturally defined locations to which ethnographies refer". These locations tend to be named and associated with the groups of people that inhabit them and, therefore, represent the study of anthropology, not the understood reality of that space by the research subjects. Instead, it highlights an ethnographic preoccupation with an untouched and unknown place (Appadurai 1988). In order to prevent only thinking of places as composed of 'natives', a multi-theoretical approach is necessary when comparing different cultures. By comparing differing populations from different regions, a more holistic viewpoint is attained by the ethnographer. By looking at aspects, such as the structural framework of societies which involves kinship roles, ideology, and ritual, ethnographers are able to determine similarities among different populations. This contributes to a better understanding of the world as a connected system. Since there are many sequences of similarities that link places, this type of approach would help to eliminate the single cultural boundary between them (Appadurai 1988). Analyzing the importance of boundaries is crucial, because doing away with cultural discreteness (boundary) allows us to re-approach anthropology as a discipline. In-turn, this contributes to the elimination of the 'time-space bubble' which is

essential if any true analysis of a people is to occur. The perception of a 'here vs. there' or 'us vs. them' can prove to be problematic when attempting to gain an emic perspective. Gupta and Ferguson (2007:342) point out the fact that "changing our conceptions of the relation between space and cultural difference offers a new perspective on recent debates surrounding issues of anthropological representation and writing". Further, "[t]his cultural critique presents the argument that the relation between 'different societies' is a way of 'spatializing' cultural differences so that ethnography becomes the link between 'home' and 'abroad'" (Gupta and Ferguson 2007:343). With this preconceived notion of a place that represents origin and a place that represents a sense of foreignness, a bias is exhibited by the ethnographer. This bias contributes to the fact that the labels put on the concept of place have the power to subliminally influence our views towards differing cultures. It presents the relation as not being between people who are different, but as being an association between 'here' and 'there'. The obvious problem is the concept of separating ourselves from the people who are being observed and the factors that distinguish 'us' from 'them' (Gupta and Ferguson 2007:343). The distinction between 'us vs. them' creates a hierarchy in the ethnographer/subject relationship which also contributes to this bias. Positioning comes into play based on the ethnographer's 'position' (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) and the actual or perceived differences in their interpretation based on that position. Marcus (1995:96) states that the type of ethnography which is responsible for this separation of 'us' and 'them' "has produced refined examinations of resistance and accommodation – a concern with the dynamics of encapsulation, focused on the relationships, language, and objects of encounter and response from the perspectives of local and cosmopolitan groups and persons who, although in different relative power positions, experience a process of being mutually displaced from what has counted as culture for each of them". Through this mode of research, new cultural changes related to colonial situations and postcolonial processes, have become apparent. Therefore a new, less common mode of ethnographic research has emerged.

Multi-sited fieldwork, often affiliated with postmodern theory, is rooted in the idea that the

entire world is connected and operates as one system. It is designed to examine the movement of cultural meanings, objects and identities, taking into account the concepts of time and space. This type of study is based on macro-theoretical concepts of the globalized world while refraining from setting the subjects in a contextual perspective (e.g. territorial boundaries). The idea is for this mobile type of ethnography to eliminate the difference between the individuals and the system in which they live. By tracing cultural formation within multiple sites, anthropologists have a more globalized view of the entire human population (Marcus 1995:96). Through multi-sited ethnography, subjects become more of a 'counterpart' than the 'other.' As opposed to subjects being merely observed, fieldwork now relies on the organized knowledge of its subjects, in the form of social movements, NGOs, and research groups. Ethnographic research has shifted from a basic observation of community life, to an active collaboration with communities in various forms of interaction with mutually focused issues and ideas. The subjects have overlapped into the intellectual realm of study where they are now actively involved in the research. This procession, from the observed to the involved, is a direct result of this new type of ethnography (Marcus 2008:7).

The anthropological microscope appears to be, at times, focused too sharply. By only observing one aspect of human movement (for example, the reason for the movement), many influential factors are being ignored. It is impossible to gain a true understanding of a phenomenon, such as diaspora, without looking at the underlying factors more globally. Multi-sited ethnography makes this possible. It is this idea of a more holistic perspective that is necessary when examining human movement, which affects not only the migrating population, but also those individuals who remain behind, as well as the population already residing in the migrant's destination (O'Hearn 2009:493). In multi-sited fieldwork, the world system is not just seen as the frame in which subjects are viewed within, but it is regarded as an important aspect to the objects of study. The world system is defined by the idea that a few, core nations own and control the majority of the world's means of production, and are therefore the dominant force. It is an approach

which attempts to account for the political and economic divide between the core and periphery nations of the world (Chirot 1986:233). This is a crucial component of human movement, which multi-sited ethnography is able to explore through the extreme distinction of the developed and lesser developed nations of the world. Class and economic stance has a significant impact on the causes and effects of human movement and therefore dictates where and when multi-sited ethnography occurs.

Marxist anthropology was the first to study political economies of colonialism, state formation, and nation-building, within the contexts of a particular world system. Although some multi-sited ethnography has been done in this sub-discipline, most of it has been seen in interdisciplinary arenas such as media, feminist, cultural, and theoretical studies. Therefore, the basis of designing multi-sited ethnographic research lies in the connections, associations, and hypothetical relationships of populations within a variety of different locales (Marcus 1995:97). As stated by Marcus (1995:99), the goal of multi-sited ethnography is not a holistic representation – or ethnographic representation of the world in its entirety.

Multi-sited ethnography cannot be understood within the same terms as single-site research, it claims that the ethnography of a culture is also an ethnography of the system in which the culture itself is located. Of course, the assumption that the aspect of culture being observed is exhibited within several different places, as opposed to being influenced by the conditions of the people being studied, must be taken into consideration when analyzing multi-sited research. This ensures that the conclusions drawn are accurate, and not simply subjective to a single site (Marcus 1995:99). Brettell (2003:198) suggests that a comparative study of multiple sites is necessary in the study of migration. By working at both ends of the process of migration - the sending and the receiving contexts - a more comprehensive view of migration is achieved.

It is argued that a more interdisciplinary approach to migration (one that includes sociology, political science, geography, etc.) would provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between structure and agency (Brettell 2003:198). With the

conception of globalization, the ability for humans to move within the world becomes, or at least appears, more attainable. While human movement, such as forced and voluntary migration and diaspora, has affected globalization, it appears as if globalization has also allowed for an increase in human movement.

Globalization has caused anthropologists to examine many areas of study from a different perspective, but it can lead to a lack of criteria for validating statements all together. How much longer until the Boasian mosaic of world cultures turns into a melted wall of tile? Then again, how far can we suggest, like Friedman (1994:211–213), that boundedness never really existed in the first place, or at least that it no longer exists in the age of globalization (O’Hearn 2009:494)? With this focus on migration around the world, anthropologists must re-evaluate their approaches to examining the concept of cultural formation in the world system. Multi-sited ethnographic research allows anthropologists to assess the impact of mass movement on the world population because it takes into consideration the ideas of globalization and place. It also allows anthropologists to re-conceptualize the idea of culture and how human movement impacts cultures within the world system.

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